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Archbishop to celebrate Mass at Holy Land USA, honoring Fr. McGivney

Archbishop Leonard Blair will celebrate Mass on top of Holy Land USA on August 11 in an event being planned in collaboration with the Knights of Columbus and the organization that owns the park.

The group organizing the Holy Land Mountaintop Mass in Waterbury hopes to see several thousand people attend from across the state. They believe it will increase devotion to Venerable Fr. Michael McGivney, founder of the Knights of Columbus, whose cause for sainthood is being considered by the Vatican, in addition to calling attention to Holy Land, which during the 1960s and 1970s attracted more than 40,000 visitors annually.

“We think this will be a significant religious event for the city and the state, in the spirit of the new evangelization,” said Father James Sullivan, pastor of Church of the Assumption in Ansonia and organizer of the Mass. “It will be a celebration of Holy Land and Father McGivney, who grew up in Waterbury.”

Chuck Pagano, Chairman of Holy Land USA, said, "Growing up in Waterbury connected me with Holy Land as a child because I saw it every evening from my childhood bed. Additionally, there are numerous reminders of Father McGivney around our city that still connect me with him. The event planned for August is a perfect celebration for both important entities that helped develop me over the years.”

In 1966, when Father Sullivan was 6 years old, his father took him and his aunt, a missionary nun visiting from Australia, to the top of Pine Hill to see Holy Land USA for the first time.

The group walked up the hill, and from the 56-foot illuminated cross that came to symbolize the religious theme park, they could survey the city below and see the places where Father McGivney was born, baptized and buried for 92 years until his body was moved to St. Mary Church in New Haven, which had been his first assignment as a priest. The August 11 Mass is on the eve of Father McGivney's birthday, August 12, 1852. He died at 38 on August 14, 1890.

Father Sullivan often jokes that he and Father McGivney were neighbors, who lived near each other in Waterbury on the opposite sides of the Naugatuck River ... a century apart.

The park, which is on an 18-acre site, once included biblical scenes from the life of Jesus and recreations of Bethlehem and Jerusalem. Holy Land was developed by John Baptist Greco, a Waterbury attorney, who began a volunteer organization called Companions of Christ, whose purpose was to create and oversee the religious park, which opened in 1955.

However, Holy Land fell into disrepair and eventually closed in 1984. When John Greco died two years later, the property was given to the Religious Teachers Filippini. Over the years, various attempts to revive the park were unsuccessful although the cross was restored and later replaced in 2008 and dedicated during a Mass by Archbishop Henry Mansell.

In 2013, Mayor Neil O’Leary and Waterbury businessman Fred “Fritz” Blasius purchased the site from the Filippini Sisters. They eventually erected a new and larger cross on

the hill, and there have been other initiatives to refurbish parts of the park, which reopened on September 14, 2014 with an inaugural Mass. To prepare for the August 11 Mass, the park is being repaved and landscaped.

“Anyone who has been through the area is familiar with Holy Land,” Father Sullivan said. “Truck drivers passing on Route 84 would look for the cross. People were moved to see it illuminated at night on the hilltop. The mountain has always had a spiritual mystique. It is a landmark, but also an icon.”

Father Sullivan had the idea for the Holy Land Mountaintop Mass following the success of a Mass last year on the Feast of the Transfiguration, which he celebrated for almost 100 people on the top of High Rock in Naugatuck. When he approached Archbishop Blair, Mayor O’Leary and John Marrella, Supreme Advocate and General Counsel of the Knights of Columbus, he got an enthusiastic reception and moved forward.

“Being born in Waterbury, I can recall as a young boy when all the churches were filled,” Father Sullivan said. “The spiritual climate of the world has diminished with many forces pulling us away from our devotion to God. The human heart, however, is made for God. The prayer of many of us is that He be found again. By God’s grace, Holy Land in Waterbury will help to reignite that flame of love.”

People are encouraged to arrive between 3:00 and 4:00p.m. for the rosary, followed by praise and worship music by the Christian group Hands and Feet. The Mass will begin at 5:30p.m. For further information about the Holy Land Mountaintop Mass, contact: father@assumptionansoniamassachusetts.com or info@holylandwaterbury.com or call (203) 735-7857.